

How to Research Your Family at the Library of Michigan

How do I get started?

Genealogy is not an expensive or difficult hobby to start. You need a pad of paper, some folders and a couple of pencils. The key to success is organization. Start keeping a folder with dividers for each family name you are researching. Lack of organization will make your search more confusing. Start with yourself (what you know) and work back in time (what you don't know).

Some people think that genealogy is only done in libraries, archives, and courthouses. Actually, one of the best places to go for information is our own homes or the homes of our relatives. Before tackling the resources at your local library or archives, take time to explore family bibles, scrapbooks and photo albums. Check out your family closets, attics or storage areas. You may find a stash of genealogical information in those hidden treasures. Look at your family history as a treasure hunt or a mystery.

Make your research a family project. Get the entire family involved with your research. One of the best things about genealogy is that it is a hobby that can be shared and enjoyed with the whole family.

We suggest that you follow these steps when beginning your research.

Step 1: Get Organized.

A pedigree chart is a form that shows the various lines of ancestors for a person. It is like a map showing you what you know and what you need to find out. A group sheet is the detail record of one family. It lists the parent, their children, important dates and location, and their children's spouses. Locations should have locality, county, state or country. Make folders for each family you're researching. Have a pre-printed checklist of all the sources you need to check for each family. A research log or calendar can be useful in keeping your family history research on track.

Step 2: Read, Read, Read...

Select a "how-to" book on genealogy. Read a book that explains how to do research on families in the United States. You can explore Canadian, Mexican or overseas ancestors at a later time. Your local library or bookstore will have several titles to choose from.

Step 3: Don't start until you have done your homework.

See how much of the pedigree charts and group sheets you can fill out by using sources that you find at home. The best home sources are parents, grandparents, great grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. Ask for the full names of the relatives including any nicknames they have or may have had in their past. Also from your relatives ask for birth dates, marriage dates, death dates and the location of each event. Try to make a copy of any documents, sources of information or photographs that they may have to share with you.

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|------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|------------------------|
| 1. Journals/Diaries | 6. School Records | 10. Photo Albums | 14. Family Traditions |
| 2. Letters | 7. Family Bibles | 11. Certificates | 15. Autograph Books |
| 3. Scrapbooks | 8. Baby Books | 12. Church Records | 16. Other Family Books |
| 4. Newspaper Clippings | | | |
| 5. Announcements | 9. Medical Records | 13. Memorial Cards | |

Other home sources include:

Step 4: Oral Histories

Interview relatives and important citizens from the communities where your family lived. It is a good idea to tape record your family interviews because you will be able to replay them and pick up new bits of information each time you listen. Remember to get permission before recording your interviews. Try to obtain personal memories and tales of the other relatives they knew while growing up.

Step 5: Plan a detailed search strategy

Make sure your research is organized. Use your pedigree chart to focus on a particular individual. You can't search for all of your ancestors at the same time. When requesting information by mail, always include a large self-addressed stamped envelope (SASE) with your request and offer to pay for copying and mailing costs. If someone sends you information try to send him or her a thank you along with stamps to cover their postage.

Step 6: Census Records

Search the U.S. and Canadian census records and learn how to use the soundex and printed census indexes. Do not stop with soundex results, also look at the original record. Examine state census records that are available.

Step 7: Search for vital records

Vital records (birth, death, and marriage) are located at the Vital Records Division of the Michigan Department of Community Health or at the county courthouse. The Library of Michigan and the State Archives has some early vital records for Michigan. The Library can assist you in locating vital records from other states or countries.

Step 8: Additional sources

Search newspapers for birth, marriage and death announcements from the towns that your family lived in. Also check out city directories and local genealogy and history publications.

Step 9: Ask for help

Librarians at the Library of Michigan are always available to assist you in your research. Please feel free to ask for help.